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The IWMA in Belgium (1865–1875)

Jean Puissant

Translation from the French by Angèle David-Guillou

From the first histories of socialism in Belgium, written initially by militants then by professional historians from the 1950s, the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) has been presented as a founding moment, or at least as an important one, in the evolution towards the creation of the Belgium labour party, Parti ouvrier belge (POB) in 1885, and later on that of its successors – the Belgium socialist party, PSB-BSP in 1945 and the current socialist parties, the French-speaking PS and the Dutch-speaking SP/AO. One hundred years after the creation of the POB, in 1985, most of the socialist federations still traced the origin of their party back to the IWMA. This extremely linear genealogical approach had given way to a historiographic tradition that was only challenged in 2000.¹

A new wave of historical research in the years 1950 to 1980 produced numerous studies, including substantial publications of source materials² which, combined with the general histories of the IWMA, formed an exceptional body of original documents – a rare thing in the field of the history of social organisations. If the harvest was not as fruitful in the following years,³ our general understanding of the subject was refined by biographies.⁴ Finally, through abundant cross-studies, the work of Freddy Joris helped us understand why the Verviers regional federation – a wool world centre at the time – had been the most important federation and survived the longest of all. From this

* The following * will refer to the existence of a biographic entry in the Belgian section of the Maitron, *Dictionnaire du Mouvement Ouvrier en Belgique* : maitron-en-ligne.univ-parisi.fr.

1 Jan Moulaert, *Le Mouvement anarchiste en Belgique 1870–1914* (Bruxelles, 1996).

2 See for instance in the bibliography the volumes of the collection published by the Centre interuniversitaire d'Histoire contemporaine (CIHC).

3 Nevertheless, one must cite the studies written by John Bartier on the subject of the early days of socialism, the influence of Proudhon and the role of Léon Fontaine, first contact of Marx and the IWMA in Belgium: see John Bartier, *Libéralisme et socialisme au XIXe siècle* (Bruxelles, 1981).

4 See Marc Mayné, *Eugène Hins* (Bruxelles 1994) ; Luc Peiren, *César De Paepe : de l'utopie à la réalité* (Gand, 1992) ; Freddy Joris, *Pierre Fluche et le mouvement ouvrier verviétois sous Léopold II* (1997) and Marie Mineur, *Marie rebelle*, Avant-Propos (Waterloo, 2013).

wealth of information, we will extract certain themes in order to suggest new research perspectives on the nature and importance of the IWMA, its influence in Belgium and its role in the internationalist movement.

1842 to 1865: Prolegomena

Belgium was the scene of rapid industrialisation thanks to what I call a “coal Kuwait” – Wallonia – and to a network of canals, managed waterways, roads and an early railway system. From 1842 to 1872, the industrial average annual growth was above five per cent – two thirds more than that of Great Britain.⁵ The development of productive forces, mechanisation and industrial capitalism was impressive and the country became the “small” workshop of the modern world, exploiting *en masse* a considerable workforce (women and children in particular) during long hours of low-paid labour. Characterised by its liberal institutions, Belgium practised “social dumping” against its neighbours, partners and rivals. It was the meaning of Marx’s remark when he described the country as “the paradise of continental capitalism”. Industries marked by intensive mechanisation, and sometimes by the intervention of financial capitalism – mining and wool in Verviers, cotton in Ghent, iron, steel and metallurgy in Liege, Charleroi and the Central basin – enjoyed an extremely rapid growth which accounted for the emergence of new social movements in various industrial regions.

The period was also favourable to internationalism, in all its forms: first International Exhibitions from 1851, first international associations (International Congress of Charity, Correction and Philanthropy in Brussels in 1856, International Association for the Advancement of Social Sciences in 1862), free trade agreements in the 1860s and even a Black International in response to the IWMA.⁶ Belgium played an active role in this internationalism due to its imposed and guaranteed neutrality. Notably, the international student congresses – Liege 1865, Brussels 1868, Ghent 1869 – gave young scholars – radicals, socialists, French and Belgian – the possibility to refer publicly to Comte, Colins, Proudhon, etc. and thus to create outrage in the Belgian and European press.⁷

5 See René Leboutte, Jean Puissant, Denis Scuto, *Un siècle d'histoire industrielle. Belgique, Pays-Bas, Luxembourg. Industrialisation et société 1873–1973* (Paris, 1998), pp. 31 ff.

6 See Emile Lamberts (ed.), *The Black International* (Leuven, 2002).

7 See John Bartier, “Etudiants et mouvements révolutionnaires au temps de la première internationale”, in *Mélanges offerts à Guillaume Jacquemyns* (Bruxelles, 1968), pp. 35–60. In the second version of the article published in 1981, national and international repercussions of these congresses are analysed, including with regard to cardinal Dupanloup.

The IWMA was part of this general movement – even if Marx had been thinking of creating an international organisation since 1847 – against a background of labour associations which flourished along with the economy: typographer-composers and bronze workers in Brussels (1842 and 1858), weavers and spinners in Ghent (the first organisations of large-scale industry in 1857), friendly societies (General Congress in 1863) and often precarious and short-lived production cooperatives. In 1858, the Association générale ouvrière (AGO) federated eleven of the fourteen professional associations in Brussels: bronze workers, jewellers, locksmiths, cabinetmakers, woodcarvers, glove makers, hatters, furnishing trimmings specialists and more, and even tried to get the Ghent cotton industry's unions on board.⁸ The AGO campaigned for the right to associate and held meetings in the provinces, in Ghent and in the Hainaut region in particular. Thus the IWMA could not be considered original. The AGO sent a delegate to the Brussels Congress in 1868 but remained reluctant to the ideology of the new association, which considered it an opponent. Cooperation on one side, class struggle on the other emerged as the two poles identifying and distinguishing the two organisations.

Two rationalist organisations, created out of each other and both fiercely anticlerical, formed the matrix for the IWMA: L'Affranchissement (1854) and Les Solidaires (1857). They were mainly working class – craftsmen and skilled workers from Brussels – but also attracted the petty bourgeoisie. It was in this milieu that a radical approach emerged, articulated by César De Paepe in 1863 in Patignies: "Workers, three things must be destroyed: God, power and ownership."⁹ The considerable weight of the Church and the clergy on Belgian society and on its governing bodies, since the 1830 revolution, led those first socialists to hold the Church, religion and the political struggles they produced, responsible for the absence of political democratisation and for the ruling classes' refusal to consider the social question.¹⁰

8 See Eliane Gubin, Jean-Paul Mahoux, Jean Puissant, "Question sociale et libéralisme. L'exemple de l'association Générale ouvrière (1858–1920)", *Huldeboek Prof. dr Marcel Bots* (Gent, 1995), pp. 139–165.

9 "Prolétaires, il y a trois choses à détruire: Dieu, le pouvoir et la propriété." The Patignies section, unique in this poor rural region of the Ardennes, was founded by a former non-commissioned officer who was in contact with the rationalist associations during his military service. See Jean Puissant, "Un agriculteur ardennais libre penseur et socialiste (Joseph Henry*)" in *La Belgique rurale du Moyen âge à nos jours, Mélanges offerts à J.-J. Hoebanx*, (Bruxelles, 1985), pp. 371–379.

10 See Alan Kittel, "Socialist versus Catholic in Belgium. The Role of Anticlericalism in the development of Belgian Left", *The Historian*, 23, pp. 418–435; Els Witte, "De belgische vrijdenkersorganisaties (1854–1914), ontstaan, ontwikkeling en rol", *Tijdschrift voor de studie*

Birth and Rise of the IWMA

The first contacts between the IWMA and Belgium were made in January 1865. Léon Fontaine*,¹¹ university student, member of Les Solidaires and the association Le Peuple – its propaganda arm which had taken part with Paz in the organisation of the first meeting of Mazzini's Association Fédérative Universelle in Brussels – received from Le Lubez, correspondent for Belgium, a copy of the rules and address of the International. But Marx personally contacted Le Peuple, who gave shelter to the first section of the IWMA on 17 July 1865. Despite *La Tribune du Peuple*, official organ of Le Peuple and thus of the IWMA from January 1866, the organisation remained confidential and essentially Brusse-lian until 1868. The militants were all wage-earners or independent workers, involved in their rationalist organisations (unions or others), subjected to the 60-hour week and the perpetual search for work. The correspondence with London showed difficulties of communication; impatience, which was hardly concealed, was usual. The IWMA did not have a real resonance in Belgium at that time. Hence its silence during the metallurgy and mining strikes in Charleroi between 28 January and 7 February 1867, even when its repression killed men and led to many being arrested and condemned, including at the Mons Court of Assizes.¹²

In September 1865, César De Paepe attended the London conference. He was 24 then, a typographer and a proofreader. In September 1867, he took an active part in the Lausanne Congress; at that time he had started studying medicine once again, at the ULB.¹³ His work, his readings, his relations quickly made him the main “socialist” theorist of the country. It was significant that in his report written in London in 1865 on the Belgian section, he was only concerned with Brussels and pinpointed three active milieus: (1) The revolutionaries: L’Affranchissement and its leaders, the tailor Nicolas Coulon and the boot-maker Jan Pellerin; (2) The unionists, who were inspired by British trade-unions, “ready to go on strike for half a penny”: the AGO; (3) The socialists, who were concerned with the suffering of the people and tried to remedy it:

van de Verlichting, 2 (1977) and Jean Puissant, “Anticléricalisme, démocratie, socialisme et inversement”, *Aspects de l’anticléricalisme du Moyen Age à nos jours, Problèmes d’histoire du christianisme*, 18 (1988), pp. 134–147.

11 See John Bartier, “Fontaine, Paz et l’Association fédérative universelle de la démocratie”, in *Libéralisme et socialisme au XIX^e siècle*, pp. 313–341.

12 See C. Oukhow, *Documents relatifs à l’histoire de la Première Internationale en Wallonie* (Louvain, 1967), p. X (with a list of Belgian IWMA congresses).

13 See Peiren, *César De Paepe, De l’utopie à la réalité*, p. 41.

the IWMA's section. He also analysed the preparing the rationalist movement and the collectivisation of the soil, two of his favourite topics. But at no point did he refer to large-scale industry or to the on-going economic upheavals which he was not yet aware of. Indeed he had not visited the industrial regions and had not met the new proletariat – neither had Marx, during his stay in Belgium, for that matter.

On 24 March 1867, a meeting was organised in order to obtain the membership of some professional associations and create a federation in Brussels.¹⁴ It was the first attempt at a systematic widening. At the time, the IWMA in Belgium was formed of two local branches: Brussels – independent craftsmen, factory workers and petty bourgeois – and Patignies – farmers and rural craftsmen. It was only in 1868 that the internationalist movement took off, under the aegis of the Brussels International Congress in September of that year and, most of all, that of the trial which followed the strikes at L'Epine in Charleroi.¹⁵

Some strikes broke out in the Charleroi basin after it was announced that wages would be cut in various coal-mines. The army intervened at the site of L'Epine, Bonne Espérance in Montigny-sur-Sambre, killing ten workers on 24 March 1868. This time the IWMA condemned the repression by an address, drafted by Pierre Vésinier¹⁶ and signed by the members of the Federal Council. Framed in black, the document was distributed throughout the region and published in *La Cigale* on 5 April. On 12 April a committee was created to support those who had been put on trial and a collection was arranged to organise their defence and help the victims of the repression. Rallies took place in May, but it was mainly the defence of the accused that attracted great attention and later enthusiasm, when they were found not guilty. Twenty-two people, including five women, appeared at the bar, several of them charged with attempt to murder by the Court of Assizes in Mons. The Brusselian lawyers, V. Arnould*, P. Janson, E. Robert, P. Splingard, etc., who assisted their colleague from Mons, were part of the editing board of *La Liberté*, the capital's weekly Proudhonist paper. They argued that the strike was legitimate, demonstrated that the acts of violence were induced by the intervention of the police and

14 In May 1867, the representatives of a dozen professional associations gathered during an administrative committee, but several of them had refused to join, wishing to remain autonomous.

15 See Louise Henneaux-Depooter, *Misères et luttes sociales dans le Hainaut 1860–1869* (Bruxelles, 1957), pp. 160 ff.

16 The French man Pierre Vésinier wrongly described the accused workers as vocal socialist militants, in his serialised articles for *La Cigale* (26 April ff.).

not the opposite, and finally that individual responsibilities were impossible to establish. On their return, the lawyers were triumphantly met by the IWMA, and Janson and Robert joined the association: the IWMA acquired a national visibility and raised concerns amongst the ruling classes.

This time the movement could take off. After a first gathering in Charleroi on 17 May, 140 public meetings were organised in the Hainaut province until the end of the year – 270 in 1869 – for the most part organised by Brusselian militants. Within a couple of years, 15 sections would be created there. In Verviers, the *Francois ouvriers* (15 November 1867) became formally affiliated in April 1868. Their weekly newspaper, *Le Mirabeau*, published between December 1867 and 1880, became the “organ of the IWMA”. The Anvers branch joined the IWMA in the spring, under the leadership of its convenor, the shoemaker Philippe Coenen, founding member of the Flemish democratic circle *Volkverbond* and director of the newspaper *De Werker* (1868–1914). In Bruges, the branch created by the typographer Frans Vanden Berghe*, director of the Flemish democratic paper *Peper en Zout* in 1868 and 1869, joined in July. Of all the groups mentioned, Verviers was the most important one, beside Brussels. It emerged from local industrial and political issues preceding its affiliation to the IWMA and remained in existence after the demise of the latter (see figure 9.1).

The idea of a Brussels Congress had been on the table since 1867, but it was postponed due to vague bans imposed by the liberal Internal Affairs minister, Jules Bara, who had become cautious after the repercussions of the student congresses. The Brussels Congress took place in 1868, thanks to unrest orchestrated in the name of constitutional liberties. Its success was total, as proved by the size of its audience, the quality of its work and the considerable stir it created. Among the one-hundred-or-so people present were 58 “Belgian” delegates: 26 Wallons, 22 Brusselians including one of French origin, eight Flemings as well as Philippe Maetens*, mechanic and delegate for the French section in London, and Aimé Flahaut*, marbler and the Paris marblers’ delegate. They could not all attend the Congress in its entirety and around two dozens of them spoke. The over-representation of Belgian nationals, to be expected considering the location of the Congress, was also due to the interest it attracted: even organisations that would not join the IWMA were present, the AGO amongst others. Membership rapidly increased in the following months.

In December, during the second Belgian Congress, the IWMA organised itself on the model of the General Council in London. The board of the Brusselian Federation became the General Council of the IWMA-Belgium. Some correspondents, both international and regional, were put in charge of relations

with the provincial federations.¹⁷ Half-yearly congresses were intensifying contacts and exchanges. From then on, several publications took on the IWMA label and spread the good word: *De Werker* (Antwerp), *Peper en Zout* (Bruges), *Le Mirabeau* (Verviers), *Le Devoir* (Liege). *La Tribune du peuple* became the central organ; its sub-editors were members of the General Council. Others were close collaborators, in particular *La Liberté*, *La Cigale*, *Uylenspiegel*, and *Le Diable* in Brussels. But half a dozen miscellaneous organs also published “objective” information on the IWMA, like *Le Peuple Belge*. If the result seemed impressive, these were in fact small publications – except *Le Mirabeau*, the most enduring one, with a circulation of 2,000 to 4,000. The IWMA, transformed, as it was, into a national organisation, reached its peak with three federations in Flanders, one in Brussels and five in Wallonia, gathering more than fifty sections.¹⁸ But decline was on the way: during the fourth Belgian Congress on 31 October and 1 November 1869, only thirty-eight sections were represented; in the Borinage, two were left and only one was present. A year later, during the Special Congress, just thirty remained, and at the eighth Belgian Congress on 26 and 27 May 1871 the number had fallen to twenty.

Organisation charts are useful but do not give an accurate portrait of reality. No section had a permanent official and the correspondents were not always available. Thus Alphonse Vandenhouten*, a house painter and international correspondent, found work in Fourmies in the North of France, putting a halt to the contacts he had struggled to set up with London. César de Paepe finished his medical studies and became a hospital intern. Paul Robin was expelled from Belgium in 1869. Frans Vanden Berghé, from Bruges, went to look for work in London in 1869. Eugène Hins, General Secretary, started off as a freelance journalist before becoming sub-editor to the new *Liberté*, an ephemeral daily paper in 1870, and then going into exile in Russia in 1872 to earn a living for his family. More often than not, struggles, bans and the precariousness of individual situations formed the daily lot of a worker’s life.

17 Eugène Hins was General Secretary, César De Paepe and Alphonse Vandenhouten were international correspondents. The French man Paul Robin (see *Maitron-France*) was the secretary, Charler Maetens*, a union representative, the treasurer. There were two correspondents for Flanders, one for Verviers, one for Liege, seven for the Charleroi basin, two for the Central basin and two for the Borinage region. The remaining 12 were industrial workers (seven), small employers (two or three), one independent craftsman and one commercial traveller.

18 See Oukhow, *Documents relatifs à l'histoire de la Première Internationale en Wallonie*. See figure 9.2.

Soon after, the wrongly named “IWMA’s treasure-trove” alarmed the authorities and the media, and the number of members became the subject of raving speculations. In 1871, in order to frighten the rest of Europe, O. Testut mentioned hundreds of thousands of members. Hins would speak internally of 80,000. The historian Jan Dhondt, although well-informed, cited 70,000 members in 1960, then 100,000 in 1968. In 1964, Annie Kriegel had more cautiously spoken of “perhaps 30,000” in the Borinage region.¹⁹ With regard to this specific area, we have been able to locate the origin of the exaggeration.²⁰ It comes from Charles Coudroy* who brought the IWMA into the region, but later followed his own project.²¹ Indeed, like the IWMA, he demanded that the contingency funds of 1840 be organised in favour of miners – managed in effect by miners’ associations. From this source, fanciful figures were established for the entire country. It was inferred that if there were 30,000 members in the Borinage basin, which was not the largest federation, then they could only be twice as many altogether in Belgium. But in March–April 1869, there were only between 2,300 and 3,200 subscribing members in the region! I agree with Freddy Joris on the estimation of more or else 10,000 IWMA members in Belgium in the spring of 1869. The phantasmagorical estimation – which served both to create concern amongst the authorities and to draw in strikers attracted by possible external supports – was also encouraged by the publication of addresses supporting striking inside and outside of the country, as well as by collections and announcement of payments and/or loans. It was both a source of income and of expenditure. Brussels considered solidarity, including supporting the Commune refugees in 1871–1872, as a priority over the payment of subscriptions and considered London as a clearing house, which would have implied a double accountancy: membership and solidarity.

19 See O. Testut, *L'Internationale* (Paris, 1871); Jan Dhondt, “De socialistische beweging 1856–1875”, in *Geschiedenis van de socialistische arbeidersbeweging in België* (Anvers, 1960); Jan Dhondt, C. Oukhow, “Belgique”, in *La Première Internationale. L'institution, l'implantation et le rayonnement* (Paris, 1968) and Annie Kriegel, *Les Internationales ouvrières* (Paris, 1964).

20 See Jean Puissant, *L'évolution du mouvement ouvrier socialiste dans le Borinage* (Bruxelles, 1982 and 1993), pp. 118 ff.

21 A business agent in the Pâturages region, founder of the soon-to-be dissident Borinage Federation and its periodical *La Fédération boraine*. He publicly cited “30,000” members, the number of miners affiliated to the fund in the basin, and, why not, 92,000, the total of Belgian miners (Wallonian at the time), or even 300,000, the number of industrial workers that could be involved (24 April 1869). See Puissant, *L'évolution du mouvement ouvrier socialiste*.

Decline

The IWMA's treasure-trove was a myth, the staggering size of its membership a legend. Despite their efforts, the highest judicial authorities were forced to drop charges against the leaders of the IWMA in June 1869.²² But they succeeded in breaking the organisation's dynamism, encouraging dissidence and provoking a backward surge in membership – in the number of sections and members. The movement encountered many difficulties when its future had seemed to hold great promise. The causes were manifold: growth crisis, repression, divisions and recurrent international crises between 1869 and 1871. The international context – Franco-Prussian war, the Paris Commune, election results favouring the conservative parties throughout Europe – also had repercussions that are difficult to gauge.

*Repression: "Belgian Massacres"*²³

On 2 April 1869, the puddlers of Cockerill in Seraing went on strike, soon followed by other workers including the miners of the integrated metallurgy society. The intervention of the army and the *gendarmérie* on 9, 10 and 11 April, ended with two dead and many injured. The Belgium and London General Councils expressed their indignation at the actions taken by the state's repressive forces. On 12 April, a miners' strike was started in the Borinage region and spread. On 15 April in Frameries, as it was facing more than a thousand demonstrators, the army killed three people, including one woman, and injured several others.²⁴ The IWMA condemned the repression and organised well-attended meetings. If it was in no way responsible for these strikes, which it advised against, in fact, the IWMA did not condemn them like it did in 1865. Its message legitimated the workers' anger but stressed the inefficiency of disorganised spontaneous strikes and advocated the formation of associations and joining the IWMA. De Bavay, Brussels's public prosecutor, intended to "strike the bandits [leaders of the IWMA] hard" and take advantage of the circumstances to

22 "[...] because the Internationale, I have proof of this, does not have a penny to spare" ("*car l'Internationale comme j'en ai la preuve, ne possède pas un sou*") wrote De Bavay, public prosecutor, to the King's Prosecutor (25 April 1869, Archives Générales du Royaume [hereafter AGR], PG, 218 A).

23 Title of the address of the London General Council, 20 April 1869.

24 It was the fourth times since 1867 that a crowd had been fired at, a sad tradition in the armed forces that remained active until 1902. Without any training on the maintenance of law and order, the army "readily opened fire", as Joël Michel noted in 1990, making Belgium the most repressive country in Western Europe – French revolutions excepted.

put an end to the IWMA.²⁵ On 16 April, Eugène Hins then Pierre Croisier*, Roch Spingard, Bonami Delesalle and Charles Coudroy were arrested and branches were searched. The dispute deflated and charges were dropped but the damage was done, with long-term consequences. At its peak, the uproar amongst internationalist milieus could not hamper their progressive decline.

Dissidences and Schisms: 1869

In the Borinage region where sections prospered to a total of ten by the beginning of 1869, a schism became inevitable between a federation formed of mutual help societies, led by Coudroy, and the general Borinage Federation, supported by the IWMA and characterised by the existence of resistance funds. Only the neighbouring sections of Jemappes and Cuesmes would ultimately survive, more or less, and serve as transitions towards new endeavours, ten years later. This division rested on a profound disagreement regarding objectives and means: Coudroy was in favour of a service association capable of improving the lot of workers – whilst securing a generous financial position for himself; the IWMA favoured a struggle and defence organisation.²⁶

In Brussels, a movement of dissidence was starting to gather momentum at beginning of the year, against a background of personal and ideological opposition. The *Tribune du Peuple*, too Brusselian and in deficit, interrupted its publication in favour of *L'Internationale*, printed from 1869 to 1873. The latter, still published by D. Brismée*, was deemed more “national” in scope. During several months, some dissidents published a *Nouvelle Tribune du Peuple* opposed to *L'Internationale*. They were led by P. Esselens, a chemical scientist condemned in 1848, B. Delesalle, a jeweller of French origins and P. Robin's father-in-law, and R. Spingard, a future lawyer, like his brothers. They created a new section, the Affranchis, associated to the Affranchis of Jumet-Charleroi, and sought affiliation with London. Their posture was ambiguous as the new association attempted to federate all those who were opposed to the IWMA's leadership, regardless of their orientations, from the moderate Coudroy to the most “revolutionaries” – L'Affranchissement, Coulon and Pellerin – while at the same time setting records straight with *Le Peuple* on ideological, political and even personal levels. The plan failed through but the frontal attacks against Brismée – printer and administrator of the internationalist press, unassuming leader of the IWMA via both his son-in-laws De Paepe and Hins – mixed politics with personal resentment. Worse than this, it cast suspicions on

25 Letter from the public prosecutor to the King of Mons's prosecutor, 16 April 1869 (AGR, PG, 208, dossier AIT).

26 See Puissant, *L'évolution du mouvement ouvrier socialiste*.

the printer's honesty and on his management of the moneys passing through the IWMA – the main reason for workers' over-cautiousness towards organisations. Money issues were damning for workers, and all the controversies, mistakes and misappropriation of funds were structural factors responsible for the disbandment of organisations and individuals.²⁷ In addition, the economic boom of the years 1871–1873 and the rise in wages seemed to suggest that things were getting better by themselves.

Organisational Issues

International quarrels did not show the Belgian International in more favourable lights either. As early as May 1869, the Seraing section (metallurgists-Liege) suggested, in order to avoid a “dangerous centralisation”, that federations should be allowed to exchange correspondences between each other directly without having to refer to the General Council. The Fourth Congress passed this motion. Responding to accusations on the role of the IWMA during the Commune, the Eighth Congress of December 1871 stated that: “considering on the contrary that the International, wishing to react against despotism and centralisation, [had] always thought it necessary to conform its organisation to its principles; declare[d] once and for all that the International [was] and [had] always solely been a grouping of entirely autonomous federations. That the General Council [was] and [had] always solely been a correspondence and information centre.”²⁸ During the congress, the Charleroi Federation put forward the possibility of appointing regional federations' representatives to the Belgian General Council and to encourage the creation of national federations of trade associations with one representative present at the General Council. If the suppression of the International General Council sparked a debate at the Ninth Congress of May 1872, the question was relegated to the sections before a decision could be made. The Tenth Congress, in December 1872, explicitly referred to the Hague International Congress that implemented the schism, and also to the “federalist” congress of Saint-Imier, adopting its conclusions. Thus the IWMA of Belgium clearly chose its side and adapted its structures.

27 The Borinage section of Frameries, for instance, decided to refund members their subscriptions, refused to take side and was disbanded. See Puissant, *L'évolution du mouvement ouvrier socialiste*, p. 137.

28 See Oukhow, *Documents relatifs à l'histoire de la Première Internationale en Wallonie*, p. 306. “Considérant qu'au contraire l'Internationale, voulant réagir contre le despotisme et la centralisation, a toujours cru devoir conformer son organisation à ses principes ; déclare une fois pour toutes que l'Internationale n'est et n'a jamais été qu'un groupement de fédérations totalement autonomes. Que le Conseil général n'est et n'a jamais été qu'un centre de correspondance et de renseignements.”

The Belgian congress of December 1873 decided to transfer the General Council's headquarters to Verviers and took *Mirabeau* as its official organ until 1880. The decision reflected a reality: Verviers was the main regional federation, the largest and most dynamic one and, from then on, the most "revolutionary", too. F. Joris highlighted its relative stability but also noted the regular, if often conflicting, renewals of its leaders. From that time onward, the most radical ones were in charge.²⁹

The Belgian Federation took part in the federalist congresses of Geneva in September 1873 – with five delegates and three regional federations – the Brussels Congress of September 1874 – eleven delegates from six regional federations, out of a total of 18 delegates. At the Bern Congress, in October 1876, De Paepe was the only Belgian delegate. The federalist congress of Verviers in September 1877 gathered 17 delegates, including 15 from Verviers, one from Liege and one from Charleroi. It became apparent that in the following days Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp were preparing the international socialist congress of Ghent. The progressive dissolution of the IWMA-Belgium also began: the Brussels section held its last meeting in 1882. We can reasonably claim that the Brussels Congress of 1874 put an end to the Belgian Federation of the IWMA. It was there that De Paepe defended his report on the "organisation of public services in the society to come"³⁰ in which he clearly demonstrated that the predominant ideology of the federative IWMA was not compatible with his and that this state of affairs was fundamentally dividing the Belgian section. With this in mind, we must now reflect on the ideological and political determinants of the IWMA in Belgium.

Although the question has regularly been raised in academic literature, it has never been thoroughly analysed and its chronology has never been established. By choosing the title *Entre Marx et Bakoukine*, B. Dandois perfectly summarised the reality of the situation.³¹ M. Mayné shed a light on the role of Eugène Hins, who became a major personality in the fields of organisation and propaganda between 1869 and 1872; whereas the more studious De Paepe was writing articles and reports, whilst at the same time finishing his medical studies. The ideology of the association *Le Peuple*, at the origin of the IWMA in Brussels, was undeniably Proudhonist in its references and objectives. From the very start, consumers' mutual help and cooperative societies were at the centre of its efforts; so were unions, of course, but at first strikes raised caution, if not rejection. The role of these organisations was two-fold: on one hand they

29 See Joris, *Pierre Fluche*.

30 "Organisation des services publics dans la société future."

31 See Bernard Dandois, *Entre Marx et Bakounine*, C. De Paepe. *Correspondance* (Paris, 1974).

aimed at improving working conditions, on the other hand they sought to develop solidarity between its members and to structure a movement which could impact on social and even political choices; an orientation which its “revolutionary” elements profoundly criticised, e.g. *La Nouvelle Tribune du Peuple*.

On several occasions, the IWMA tried to bring unions together within the regional federations of Brussels, Ghent, Verviers, Liege and of the Borinage area. All of these had set up an internal or external mutual help fund. On Verviers's suggestion, the last years, from 1872 to 1874, were dedicated to Hins's 1868 project which examined the drafting of work registers³² moulded on the example of the 1788 French registers of grievances (*cahiers de doléances*). But the most characteristic and lesser-studied issue had certainly been that of consumption cooperatives, far more numerous than production cooperatives. In April 1871, in Liege, a congress gathering thirty-three delegates and twenty associations positioned itself in favour of cooperation, “but within the International and without relinquishing our total emancipation”.³³ With regards to mutual help societies, the project defended by the IWMA to substitute itself to employer-run contingency funds for miners, quarrymen and fishermen was telling. The Coudroy schism, in the Borinage region, put an end to this undoubtedly logical but perfectly unrealistic idea, in the absence of state policies in this domain. The Solidaires of Fayt – 1870 – would be at the origin of the first Maison du Peuple in Belgium. This network of associations was typical of the influence of the Brussels section of the IWMA and would later on become the hallmark of the POB, with greater success this time. The Proudhonist sensibility was also present in *La Liberté* – 1867 to 1873. The journal, to which general secretary Hins collaborated, denoted the advantage of supporting the IWMA and that of opposing its organ, *L'Internationale*, when it converted to collectivism through the impetus given by De Paepe.

In fact, doctrinal unity never existed within the Belgian Federation, having always been a place for contradictory debates with shifting majorities. During the 1867 Lausanne Congress, the majority report of the Brussels section, which supported women's traditional role with a Proudhonist view in mind – Vandenhouten, De Paepe, Fontaine – was voted in, supplanting the minority report in favour of women's right to work and to associate – Esselens, Robin, Hins. De Paepe argued in favour of common landownership, an idea already

32 “Cahiers du travail.”

33 See Oukhow, *Documents relatifs à l'histoire de la Première Internationale en Wallonie*, pp. 149 ff. “[...] mais dans le sein de l'Internationale et sans renoncer à notre affranchissement complet.”

defended by Colins, an influential individual amongst certain Belgian intellectual milieux: he was defeated by the “Proudhonists”. During the 1868 Brussels Congress, the Belgian group, in association with the “Marxists”, gained a majority on this question. On 13 November 1869, De Paepe wrote to Marx: “I am *deproudhonising* myself more and more, to say the truth I am no longer a Proudhonist: I was only ever one with notable reserves for that matter, especially regarding landownership, striking and *Trade-Unions*.”³⁴ On the contrary, Hins remained faithful to many ideas of Proudhon, strongly supported by *La Liberté*, especially on this subject.³⁵ If the condemning of Bakunin’s organisational manoeuvres, a known thing in Brussels, was unanimous and irrevocable in 1869,³⁶ the Belgian section tried to avert a schism between Marx’s and Bakunin’s groups, notably at the London conference in September 1871. M. Mayné³⁷ showed that Marx’s prejudices against the Belgian stance were unjustified, notably those against Hins, “a Proudhonist married to a Russian school teacher,”³⁸ whom he had met in Paris in 1870. According to Mayné, these preconceptions were made *ad hominem* instead of being based on documented proofs. Nevertheless, Belgian correspondents did condemn the nature of Marx’s comments on Bakunin. The Belgian group was also evolving towards a restriction of the Central basin’s powers over regional sections, seeking to give larger autonomy to the latter, if only for material reasons. They fought for this proposal at an international level. In fact, it was the context of the year 1871, electrified by the events of the Commune and their repression, which explained why, gradually and in opposition to Marx’s “authoritarianism”, the Belgian Federation, despite a *rapprochement* with the German leader on the question of collectivism, pronounced itself against the expulsion of Bakunin and his friends at The Hague in 1872. This position was not predicated on support for “anarchy”. The Belgian Federation sided with the Federative

34 See Daisy Devreese, *Documents relatifs aux militants belges de l'AIT : correspondance 1865–1872* (Nauwelaerts [etc.], 1986), p. 198. “Je me déproudhonise de plus en plus, à vrai dire je ne suis plus proudhonien du tout; je l’ai du reste jamais été qu’avec de notables restrictions, surtout relativement à la propriété foncière, aux grèves et aux Trades Unions [...]”

35 Hins wrote: “We are politically federalist, in the same way that we are economically mutualist and religiously positivist” (“Nous sommes en politique fédéralistes, comme nous sommes mutuellistes en économie et positivistes en religion.”). *La Liberté*, 29 September 1867. See Marc Mayné, *Eugène Hins (1839–1923)* (mémoire de licence, ULB, 1988), p. 100.

36 Letter from the Belgian General Council to the group at the origin of the Alliance internationale de la démocratie socialiste, 16 janvier 1869. See D. Devreese, *op. cit.*, pp. 110–115.

37 See Mayné, *Eugène Hins (1839–1923)*, pp. 119–131.

38 “Proudhonien et époux d’une institutrice russe.”

International and took part in its congresses until the last one in 1877, held precisely in Verviers. There were anarchists in Verviers, amongst whom, most certainly, was Victor Dave* who had defended the minority position at The Hague.³⁹ Anarchist elements, at least radical ones, became prominent among the organisations of the Vesdre valley, but it was not the case in Brussels, Flanders or the Central basin, not to mention the Borinage region. With the exception of the undeniably pro “autonomy” movement, which animated the Belgian federations, one cannot detect a major doctrinal inflexion towards anarchy. De Paepe’s report on public services at the 1874 Brussels Congress allowed him to develop his collectivist convictions but was criticised by the anarchist group who feared that, even from its local scope, it could lead to the constitution of a strong state, to which they were opposed. Despite his loyalty to his “old” friends of the IWMA, De Paepe supported the changes underway outside of the IWMA and against it, from as early as 1875.

Conclusions

The successes of the IWMA are undeniable. The “socialist” approach, undistinguishable from the social question, irrefutably received a significant echo in its national and international dimension. Exceptional efforts of organisation, reflection and propaganda were at play, and neither politicians nor the press could not ignore this dynamism. The events in France brought a dramatic dimension to the period: war, revolution, repression and an unshakable solidarity. It was undoubtedly one of the causes that led to the eventual marginalisation of the International, which, in Brussels especially, was absorbed in the defending and welcoming of the *Communards* in exile. The Paris Commune remained a major influence over the following years, accentuating the perception that Commune and International were the same thing. Incontestably, Brusselian internationalists were caught in this spiral. They were less so in Verviers, but the Commune’s anniversaries were still regularly commemorated in the press and via the organisation of rallies. For workers who were members of labour associations, it was most certainly the impact of speeches and of the solidarity displayed, both symbolic and material, during social conflicts that marked their conscience in an irrational and unrealistic way. Certain organisations fed from this hope and various instances of strikes would be valuable to study: those of cigar makers, jewellers, carpenters, etc. One strike went beyond all the

39 He was expelled in 1873, following the side-tracking of his friend Pierre Fluche. See Freddy Joris, *Pierre Fluche*, pp. 88–89.

others, at least in Belgium: the one that followed that of Newcastle mechanics in April-October 1871, in favour of the nine-hour working day. As the employers were trying to take on other workers, including those from the continent, the London General Council sent a delegate, James Cohn,⁴⁰ to Brussels to dissuade Belgian workers from accepting the offer. Many articles were published in the press and letters of support were sent. Several mechanics' strikes broke out in Verviers in August, followed by other professions, in Brussels in September, Ghent in October and Charleroi in 1872. In the Central basin, four metallurgists' unions joined forces within a *Union des métiers* in 1871, rapidly becoming the most important union in the country. One after the other, mechanics and other metal workers, such as the bronze-workers of Brussels, obtained the ten-hour working day. A national union and even an international federation were then envisaged. Although imminent economic changes rendered those successes null and void in the following year, it was the first time that a relatively coordinated movement, including on an international level, achieved certain positive outcomes. It became the emblematic movement of the IWMA in Belgium. The experience gained from the results achieved, but also from the difficulties encountered, remained the most important accomplishment of the internationalist endeavour, together with the contacts made inside and outside of the country on this occasion.

The memorial hypertrophy of this period most certainly resulted from the fearfulness of the ruling classes and their, often extreme, reactions. On the other hand, it was a consequence of the belief held by succeeding generations, rightfully so, but in an exaggerated manner, that the IWMA was at the origin of the contemporary socialist movement. Old militants turned to anti-clericalism and free thinking (so D. Brismée*). But at the time, in the milieus considered, membership of the IWMA was perceived as a positive marker which brought both admiration and respect, and was often remembered, in particular during the solemn ceremonies organised for the funerals of founding members: Brismée* in 1888, De Paepe in 1890, Pierron* in 1898, Fluche* in 1909, etc. Memory was built on the heels of fact.

The "IWMA moment" was an encounter between circles of intellectuals, craftsmen and qualified workers from Brussels and the provinces, most specifically the great industry's proletariat and its social movements. Those contacts were not new but, on that occasion, they traced intellectual and physical itineraries that would no longer be forgotten. One can also be impressed by

40 James Cohn, president of the London cigar-makers, member of the General Council from 1867 to 1871, delegate at the 1868 Brussels Congress, intervened during the cigar-makers' strikes in Amsterdam and Antwerp.

the amount of work that went into the writing of rules, motion reports, periodicals and correspondences, and which was shared between educated milieus and qualified workers – although not all of them were indeed qualified – who were keen to engage with new formative learning conditions. According to F. Joris, “the IWMA was not a mere flash in the pan⁴¹.” He obviously had in mind the case of Verviers⁴², where an uncommonly organised labour movement did not emerge from the IWMA but in fact partook of its resonance in Europe and even outlived it like nowhere else in Belgium. I personally think that it was in fact a mere flash in the pan, but that sparks remained. And here, it is the Borinage region that I have in mind. However, the support of the political struggles of the years 1877 to 1885 was indeed at odds with the IWMA and its experience.

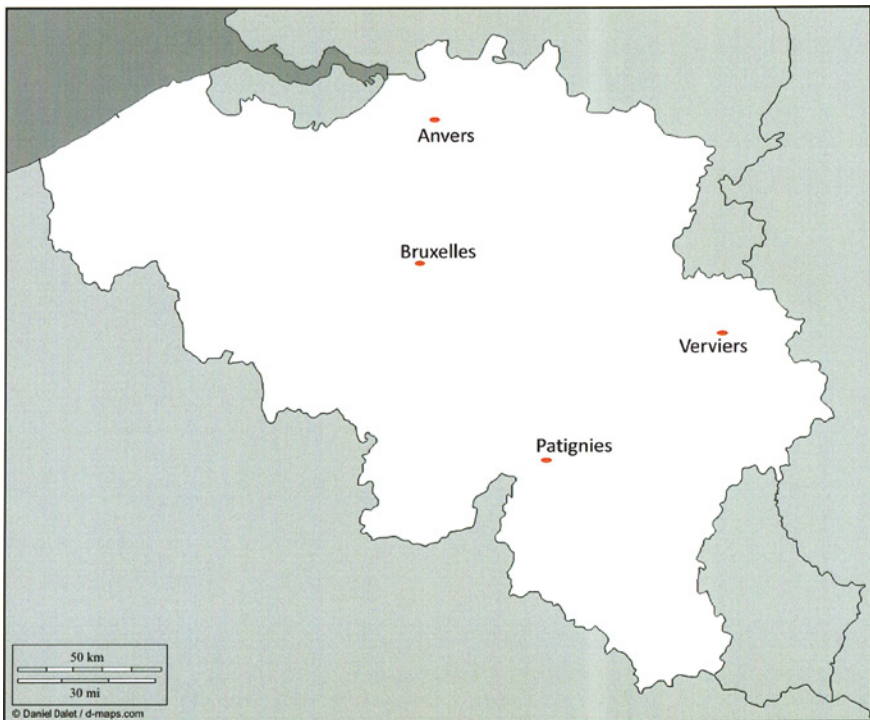


FIGURE 9.1 *Belgian Sections of the IWMA, April 1868.*

MAP BY FREDDY JORIS.

41 “L’AIT n’a pas été qu’un feu de paille.”

42 See the quoted works of Freddy Joris about Verviers.

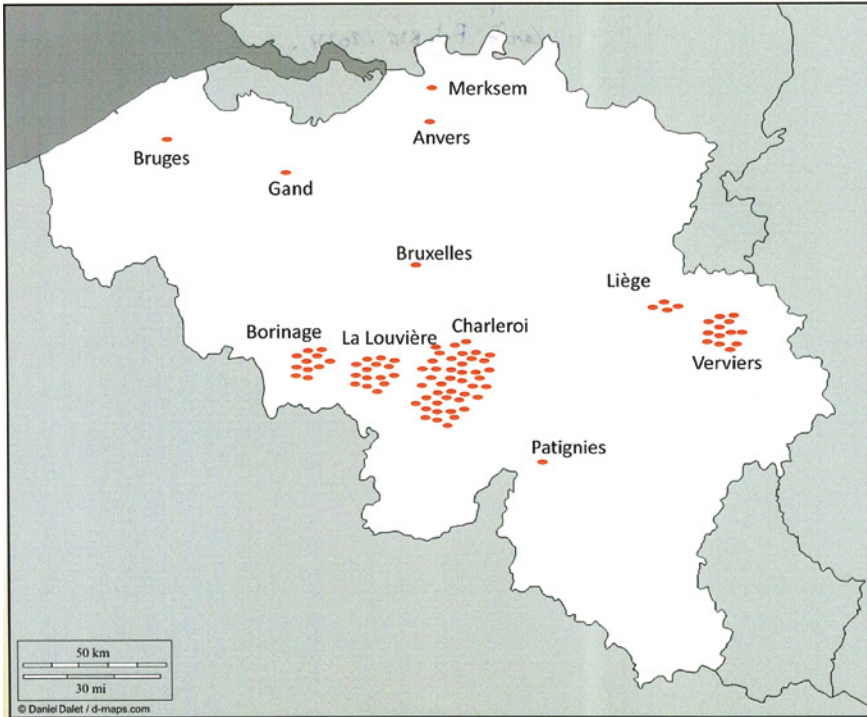


FIGURE 9.2 *Belgian Sections of the IWMA, April 1869.*

MAP BY FREDDY JORIS.

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